

# Rural Governments Face Public Transportation Challenges and Opportunities

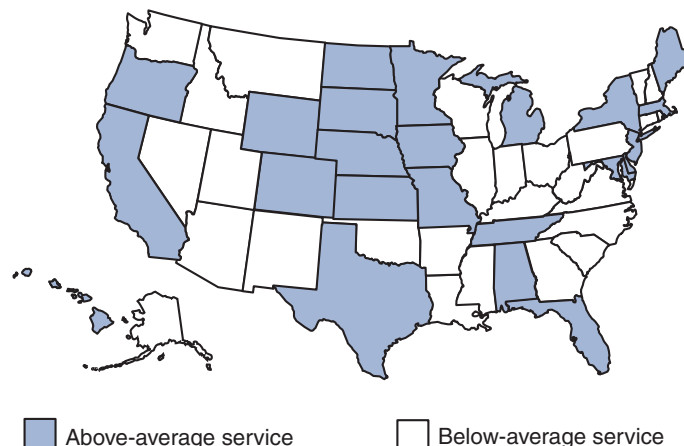
Poor rural households are three times more likely than nonpoor rural households to be without a vehicle. Public transportation serves about 60 percent of all rural counties, including 28 percent with limited service. For low-income rural residents, long commutes and lack of transportation are barriers to working. Limited transportation options also isolate the rural poor from government services and programs designed to lift them out of poverty. To address some of these challenges in rural areas, the Federal Government is providing public transportation through the Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) program.

Congress created the JARC grant program in 1998 to complement the 1996 welfare reform act. Administered by the U.S. Department of Transportation, JARC's aim is to transport recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and low-income residents to jobs, training, and other social services. JARC also encourages development of transit services in new areas or expansion of existing services by complementing the transportation assistance from service agencies, such as those providing health care, education, and child support to rural residents.

A recent ERS study found that JARC services were successfully implemented in rural areas. Existing partnerships among local human service providers (such as social service agencies and job training organizations) led to cost sharing and expanded ridership as well as strengthened transit service. Funding from many sources, including Federal, State, and local governments, as well as human service program funds and transit fares, helped to ensure a viable rural transit service. ERS researchers concluded that local and State governments have opportunities to successfully develop and implement rural transit services to serve new locations and to expand existing services (such as bus routes and van service).

Many local communities and States face challenges in implementing the program. Like most rural transit systems, JARC service in nonmetro communities often has high per rider costs due to long distances and low population densities. Funding disruptions at the national, State, and local levels also threaten sustainability of transit service and create

## The rural Midwest is well served by public transit



Source: Community Transportation Association of America.

public perceptions of service unreliability. Administrative reporting requirements can also delay transit implementation, and electronic reporting systems are often not feasible due to incompatibility with system capabilities in many rural areas. Simultaneous implementation of welfare, workforce training, and transit programs resulted in initial implementation slowdowns and contributed to frequent staff turnover from bus drivers to case workers. Future success of the program in terms of job placement and retention will largely depend on employer involvement in local recruitment and community outreach. *W*

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**For more information see . . .**

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increases, disproportionately affecting rural communities. The steep decline in manufacturing jobs seen in 2001 had subsided by early 2003, with job decline at 4 percent in early 2003. Still, from the onset of the manufacturing downturn in August 2000, the share of manufacturing jobs lost was higher in nonmetro areas (19 percent) than in metro areas (14 percent).

Recently released 2001-02 population estimates show a leveling of the "rural rebound," a period in the 1990s when population in most nonmetro counties grew much faster or declined more slowly than in the 1980s. Rural population growth has slowed

since the mid-1990s, with a number of counties reverting to population loss. The South accounted for more than half of nonmetro population gains during 2001-02. Population growth in the nonmetro West was nearly twice the rate of the rest of rural America. *W*

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**This finding is drawn from . . .**

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